

Panel: “CIA and the Cold War”

Korey Nowels

Title: “Combating an Independent Spirit: How the CIA’s Sense of Operational Autonomy Has Stymied Congressional Oversight”

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Deborah Bauer

Paper written for: History B345: History of Espionage (Fall 2015)

Korey Nowels is currently an IPFW senior majoring in Social Studies Education. As long as he has been able to study those subjects in school, Mr. Nowels has had a profound interest in the study of the humanities and the social sciences. This interest has not only compelled him to learn more about these subjects through his course work, but has also influenced his choice of major. He hopes to instill in his future students an appreciation for history and social science similar to the one he possess, and by doing so, he hopes to impact his community in meaningful way.

Abstract

America’s secret intelligence organization, the CIA, operated for decades with considerable autonomy, permitting many instances of covert activity ranging from the overthrow and attempted assassination of world leaders to the invasion of American citizens’ privacy. This autonomy stemmed from the circumstances of the agency’s founding in 1947. The relationship between the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Congress has greatly affected both the trajectory of the CIA’s development, and the nature of government regulation of intelligence agencies. CIA activity has been characterized by having relative autonomy from Congressional oversight, which partially facilitated the development of the Central Intelligence Agency into a modern intelligence service. The autonomous nature of this relationship also allowed the CIA to engage in practices that both violated laws and pushed ethical boundaries. Over the course of the twentieth century, the oversight capacity of Congress (and the federal government as a whole) expanded as a reaction to these activities. However, the expansion of oversight remained a slow process until the findings of the Church Committee led to significant structural changes in the 1970s. This paper highlights the expansion of the CIA’s power during the Cold War by considering pivotal events such as the overthrow of the Mossaddegh government in Iran, the overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala, and the agency’s initial involvement in the war in Vietnam. This paper also considers important examples of Congress expanding its oversight powers in the intelligence community, by exploring the findings of the Church Committee in 1975 and reforms enacted after September 11, 2001. Besides creating significant changes to the intelligence community as a whole, these instances further illustrate the reactionary nature of Congress towards the CIA.

Bibliographical Note

The history of the CIA and the implications of government oversight of the CIA has often been a hotly debated topic amongst scholars. An examination of the CIA’s relationship with Congress, therefore, has ample opportunity to draw from the works of historians. Several sources have proven valuable in contextualizing the history of the CIA itself. Works by historians such as Warner and Zegart chronicle the history of the CIA’s founding, and analyze the oversight of the CIA during its formative years. Additionally, the CIA itself (by means of their website) also provides useful factual information regarding the founding of the CIA. Kinzer’s piece is

utilized in this context to illustrate the growing covert role of the CIA with American involvement in Iran being used as a specific example. Other sources are utilized to clearly define the relationship between the CIA and Congress at different point in its development. For this purpose the works of Barrett and Snider are used as broad overviews of this relationship throughout the post WWII period, and the study by Johnson provides detail on how this relationship began to shift as a result of the Church Committee. Primary sources are also used to provide perspective to developments in the context of the period. For example, documents from the public record such as NSC 68, the Central Intelligence Agency Act, and the finding of a recent congressional inquiry are all utilized to illustrate the operational parameters of the CIA at given point of time. Documents from the Pentagon Papers were used to show the CIA's involvement in the Vietnam War, while coverage in the *New York Times* of the Church Committee findings and the CIA's post-911 advanced interrogation techniques was used to illustrate the extent of abuses of power.